

Former Heroin User Breaks the Cycle to Prevent New Injecting Drug Users

Busloads of Vietnamese and foreigners make their way each morning to Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Vietnam's most popular tourist destinations. Many board junks and spend a leisurely day or night on the picturesque bay, taking in a cruise and a walk through a colorful cave. In stark contrast, a mile away hidden from view along darkened alleys, anxious drug addicts hastily shoot up or inhale heroin.

Not far from a typical vegetable and meat market, Dam Quang Truong sits down next to a group of men in an abandoned warehouse who have met to relax after their quick shot of heroin.

A peer educator in Quang Ninh, Vietnam, Truong speaks to injecting drug users (IDU) about how their behavior encourages others to start injecting heroin. People who inhale and inject heroin often do so together, and when inhalers see other IDU inject in their presence or hear them talking about injecting, they are often motivated to try it themselves. New injectors usually need ask another IDU for help with their first injection. Most IDU regret their decision to start injecting, and do not want others to make the same mistake, but they are unaware how their own behavior is instrumental in motivate others to start injecting.

Truong works for a USAID-funded HIV prevention project called Break the Cycle that aims to reduce initiation into injecting drug use by targeting existing drug users. A recent study supported by USAID estimated HIV prevalence among IDU in Quang Ninh at 56%, and one of the most effective ways to reduce new infections is to prevent heroin users from injecting in the first place. The project, implemented by Population Services International (PSI), is part of the Government of Vietnam's comprehensive HIV prevention program that promotes safer behaviors across the country.

Truong injected drugs for two years before finally quitting in 1998. He caught on quickly to the Break the Cycle strategy. "I never thought if I talked to an inhaler friend about the benefits of injecting it would make him curious and want to try," he said. "Now I understand if no one helps, most inhalers will not dare to inject alone."

The USAID program provides a package of technical assistance to these partners, including training and monitoring of outreach tools and materials.

Break the Cycle is part of a comprehensive response to HIV in Vietnam targeting most at-risk population groups, including sex workers and their male clients, injecting drug users, and men who have sex with men.

One of 100 peer educators in the program, Truong describes the first time he spoke to a group of IDU. "I thought it would be impossible at first, although I didn't mind giving it a try. What I learned from the training changed me, and now I am confident. After I meet with them a few times they get it, and agree not to help an inhaler switch to injecting."